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# Power Struggles: Early Experiences Matter

by James Garbarino

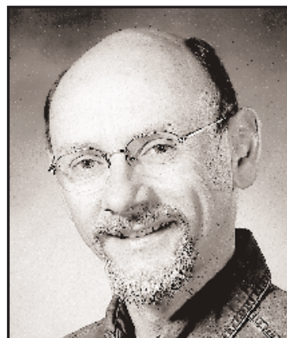
During my own brief stint as an elementary school teacher in the 1960s, I became fascinated with the power struggles I saw being played out in the first grade classroom. I recall one such child as if it were yesterday. As I watched him on the playground, six-year-old Damon dropped a banana peel on the ground and ran off. The principal saw him commit this minor act of delinquency and tracked him down. "Pick it up," he said to the boy. Damon did, and then promptly dropped it again. "Pick it up and put it in the trash," the principal responded. Damon did so, paused, and then pulled the banana peel out of the trash and dropped it on the ground again. "Pick it up, put it in the trash and leave it there!" the exasperated principal yelled. Children like Damon leave their teachers weary at the end of the day.

Coupled with aggression, this sort of power struggle wrapped up in chronic misbehavior lays the foundation for bigger problems in later life unless teachers and parents intervene early to get these children (particularly boys) back on track. The good news is that this redirection is possible.

According to the results of a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University psychologist Sheppard Kellam and his colleagues, violence prevention programs and effective classroom management techniques in first grade can have a dramatic effect on the likelihood that an aggressive six-year-old will become a violent 13-year-old. Kellam's group found that highly aggressive six-year-old boys placed in well managed first grade classrooms run by effective teachers are three times less likely to be highly aggressive by the time they reach eighth grade than they would be if they were placed in a chaotic classroom with an ineffective teacher. Why? Because the strong teacher wins the power struggle of first grade, she, not the emergent peer groups, controls the ethos of the classroom.

Research by psychologist Leonard Eron documents that by age eight, patterns of aggressive behavior and belief are crystallizing, so much so that, without intervention, they tend to continue into adulthood. When they began their studies in the 1960s, Eron and his colleagues asked eight-year-olds to identify the aggressive children in their classrooms. "Who are the children in our class who hit people, who start fights, who kick people?" they asked. When they followed up on these children three decades later, they found that by and large, the children identified as aggressive at age eight became the adults who, at age 38, hit people in their families, got into fights in the community, and drove their cars aggressively. By the way, this gives a developmental spin to the problem of road rage; it probably started as "tricycle rage."

In her book The Nurture Assumption, Judith Harris pinpoints a series of temperamental traits that put a child at risk for becoming troubled and aggressive. These include high activity level, insensitivity to the feelings of others, lack of physical fear, being easily bored with routine, seeking excitement, and less than average intelligence. Put these characteristics together in one baby and you have parents, child care workers, and teachers facing a very difficult challenge.



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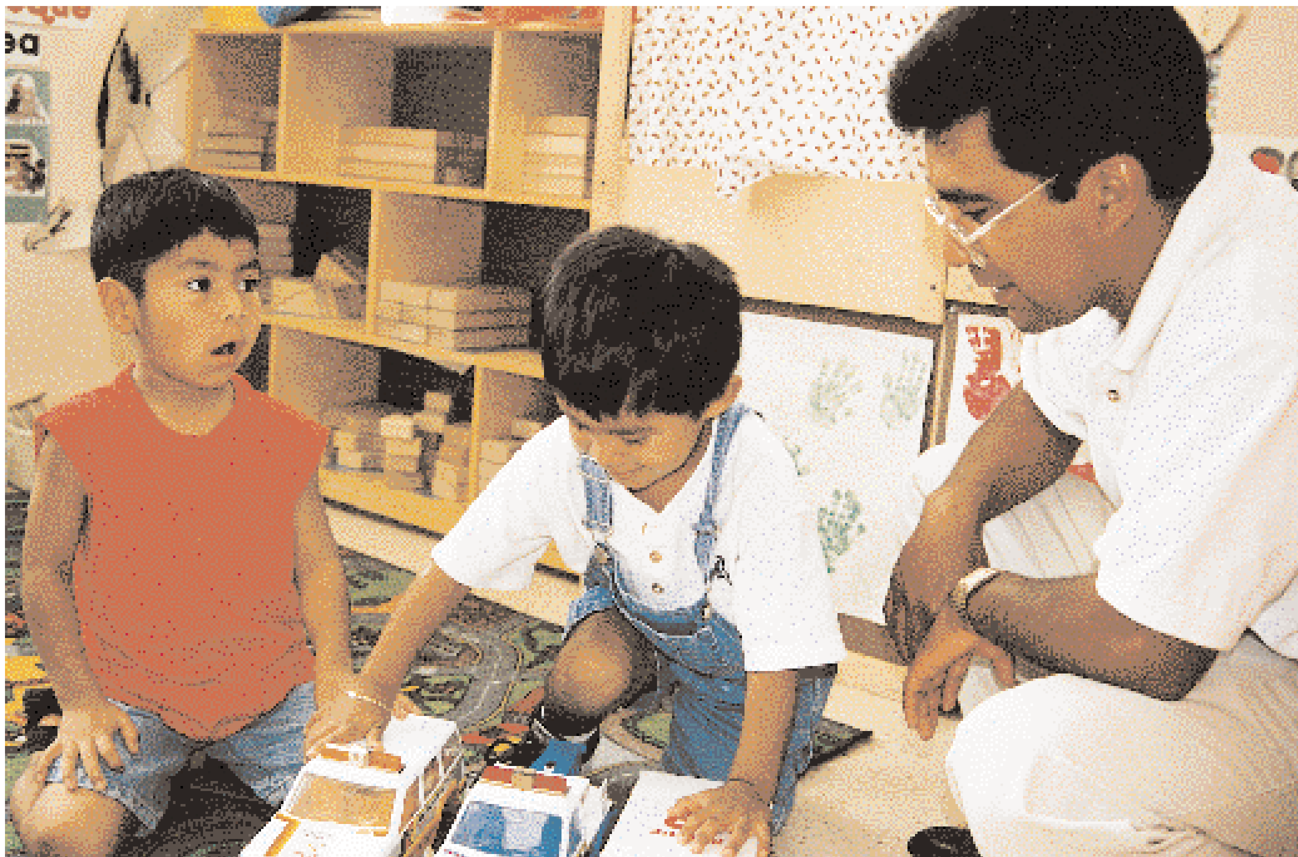
But why do some difficult babies become well socialized youth while others end up troubled or in trouble? One important reason lies in their early experience of power struggles. Chronic bad behavior and aggression are more



than a simple matter of hardwiring in the brain. They result from experience, experience that may start with misuse of parental power in the early months of life, particularly as an adaptation to early mistreatment, rejection, and inept parenting.

In a study by child psychologists Byron Egeland, Stuart Erickson, and Robert Pianta at the University of Minnesota, children who were maltreated at an early age were noticeably less cooperative than children who had not suffered harsh punishment at the hands of their parents or guardians. This is significant because the early badness of the out of control children often starts with this reaction to maltreatment, that is, being non-cooperative and resistant to parental directions and commands. This makes the task of anyone who would reform these children very challenging indeed.

Children may start off on a negative path in part because parents mistakenly withdraw from them in the first months of life, perhaps because some mothers and fathers have been taught that leaving a young infant to cry in the crib is the best medicine or because they find the baby is too much to handle. The truth is, in the early months of life, the big danger is not too much attention, but rather inattention. It is only later that effective parents begin to shape their child's behavior by responding to desirable and undesirable behavior in different ways.

Some parents believe that the way to encourage cooperativeness and obedience in a child is to be harsh and punishing from the very start, to use overwhelming parental power. But in her classic study of the relation between maternal responsiveness in the first three months of life and the child's compliance at 12 months, psychologist Eleanor Maccoby found just the opposite.

Rather than producing a spoiled brat, she found that the more responsive mothers were in the first three months of life — for example, going immediately to pick up the baby when he cried — the more obedient the child was at one year. Dr. Maccoby measured this by seeing how long the child would stay away from a desirable toy if the mother said, "No. Don't touch." Babies who had more responsive mothers were more obedient than babies who had less responsive mothers.

Of course, Maccoby's study did not directly measure how easy versus difficult the children were temperamentally from the start. But psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan has taken this part of the equation into consideration, and he finds that although it takes a special kind of responsiveness (including a lot of physical soothing), even temperamentally difficult children can learn to behave well.

University of Oregon researcher Gerald Patterson finds that chronic bad behavior is most likely to arise in the early years of a child's life when parents use harsh punishment practices and are erratic, in contrast to when they use clear and firm but warm responses to the unacceptable behavior of their children. The former reflects inept parenting, the latter competent parenting. As it turns out, parents who use harsh punishment and who mainly pay attention to their child's negative behavior and ignore their positive behavior are unintentionally encouraging inappropriate power assertion by the child.

Child maltreatment teaches children to adapt their behavior and thinking to the harsh fact that those who are in charge of caring for them are the same people who hurt, terrify, ignore, and attack them. This very adaptation ultimately becomes the source of their problems in later years. According to research of psychologist Kenneth Dodge and his colleagues at the Vanderbilt University, children who are maltreated are much more likely than non-maltreated children to develop a chronic pattern of bad behavior and aggression. The key lies in how the child comes to understand how the world works through the lens of his own abuse. Put another way, it is a matter of how the child draws his social map.

1. Children become hypersensitive to negative social cues.
2. Children become oblivious to positive social cues.
3. Children develop a repertory of aggressive behaviors that is readily accessible and can be invoked by conflict.
4. Children draw the conclusion that aggression is a successful way of getting what one wants.

How specifically are the social maps that abused kids develop linked to their later bad behavior and aggression? Dodge found that if a child is a maltreated and develops none of the four critical adaptations described earlier, the odds that he will exhibit chronic bad behavior and aggression are 5%, about what's normal for the population as a whole. But if the child manifests three, or all four, of the negative social maps and codes of behavior, we can expect a sevenfold increase in the risk that the child will exhibit the pattern of chronic bad behavior and aggression that defines conduct disorder. While most children don't become violent criminals, the majority of boys incarcerated for violent crimes were subject to abuse or neglect as children.

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Beginnings Workshop

Only 35% of abused children with negative and aggressive social maps become violent. This is the significance of Dodge's finding that 65% of the children who have been abused and have negative social maps do not develop a pattern of bad behavior and aggression. Why do some boys who are abused develop some or all of the self-destructive behaviors and activities that characterize bad boys while others do not? Some children probably respond by developing other kinds of problems, perhaps confining their response to the internalizing problems of depression, low self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, and bodily troubles like headaches and stomachaches.

All of these developmental pathways take place in a larger social context. An important aspect of that context is the images to which the child is exposed. The American Psychological Association reviewed the evidence linking television viewing to aggression and reported that TV accounts for about 10% of the variation, an effect about as strong as the link between smoking and cancer. The cultural images that validate power assertion are legion. Some children are particularly vulnerable to these images because of their temperament and experience. I think of these children as "psychological asthmatics" in a socially toxic environment.

But some children do seem resilient. Why? With some children, the answer seems clearly linked to compensatory relationships — a devoted grandmother, a father who balances out an abusing mother or a loving mother who compensates for an abusive father, someone who is positively crazy about the child and does not let the child's emotional life wither on the vine and who lovingly helps redraw the child's social maps. For some children, it is the fact they do feel a measure of love and acceptance from their parents, even amidst the destructive experience of inappropriate power assertion.

For others, it is the result of an intervention program — perhaps a highly effective early childhood education program or the work of a child guidance clinic. Therapists can help children improve their attitudes and their behaviors. Some of the same psychologists who study the origins of bad behavior and aggression in children also remedy those problems. For example, the same Gerald Patterson who studies the emergence of aggressive and oppositional behavior among children develops and implements therapeutic programs to help parents and children escape from being entrapped in coercive relationships. All around the country, there are professionals doing this good work with young children.

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